

Review

by Professor Dsc Rumen Ivanov Kanchev
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Author: Vladimir Bonov Slavenski

Topic: Bulgarian Foreign Policy Towards the Republic of North Macedonia, The Agreement of August 1, 2017

Scientific supervisor: Associate professor, PhD Daniela Pastarmadjieva

1. General description of the presented materials

The set of paper materials presented by V. B. Slavenski is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Rules for the Development of the Academic Institution of the Plovdiv University, and includes all necessary documents. Slavenski have presented four (4) publications: 1) Russian Diplomatic influence at the beginning of the War against Ukraine; 2) The Post Ideology, the Populism in and out Pandemia; 3) Waves of the Risks and Unsecurity, A new Normality in decision-making processes in Europe. I accept as relevant to the topic of the dissertation only the last publication, The political crises in Bulgaria and our relations with the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM).

2. Brief biographical data for the doctoral candidate

Vladimir Slavenski graduated from the University of Plovdiv in 2018 and received a Master's degree in Political Sciences. He studied four academic courses (disciplines) taught by me, and I could say he is a very well-educated and skilful man.

3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the set goals and tasks

The Relevance of the proposed doctoral thesis cannot be doubted. The dissertation topic is highly relevant to contemporary relations between Bulgaria and RNM. The topic includes a real political and international meaning for the RNM as well as for Bulgaria and, finally, for the European Union.

4. Cognisance of the problem

Slavenski is presented with a list of 291 titles. He knows the topic very well.

5. Methodology of the Research

Slavensky has chosen a research methodology that enabled him to address the primary research tasks and aims of his dissertation. In addition, he has made greater efforts to

analyse the main mistakes in Bulgarian diplomacy in the context of the establishment of the Agreement of August 1 2017.

6. Characterisation and evaluation of the dissertation work

The doctoral thesis of V. B. Slavenski consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. *Chapter One* analyses some key theories of international relations. The focus is on the theory of negotiations. That is the right approach, demonstrating the author's profound erudition on his dissertation topic. This chapter is lengthy; however, the key point is that it does not directly connect to the main object of study, the Agreement. Its impresses Also, it has an almost mechanical connection with the basic research. The author has quoted many works, but he missed the classic work on the Theory of Management of conflicts (O. Ramsbotham, T. Woodhouse, Hugh Miall. Contemporary Conflict Resolution, Oxford UP, 2011). The same is relevant to M. Ross's work, The Management of Conflict, Yale U, 2018, etc.

Chapter Two is well-positioned within the work's overall structure. It describes the geopolitical context in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War, within the so-called Macedonian question and its place in Bulgarian-Macedonian relations. In part 3.2.3, the evolution of Macedonian political culture is analysed. It presses the Macedonian political class to make a very radical change to North Macedonia's foreign affairs strategy. In the centre of that change, Slavenski placed the name of N. Gruevski (VMRO-DPMNE), the PM of NM. He began to develop an authoritarian political regime to gain control over the institutions, media, juridicial system, and army. The final result of those actions of Gruevski was “isolation from Europe and confrontation with close neighbours “ (p. 17, Author's Referat). I could add that North Macedonia continues to suffer from that political model today, and it will create new problems along its path to full EU membership.

The research focus of *Chapter Three* is “The Agreement for friendship between Bulgaria and North Macedonia”, August 1, 2017. In this chapter, Slavenski develops an impressive methodological approach grounded in the Theory of Games. He has defined the strategic balance between Bulgaria and NM The conclusion made by him is that these two countries “are in a middling effective, but not stable strategic balance” (p. 20, Author's

Referat). Respectfully, the Agreement Efficiency is assessed at 57%. I fully agree with this issue. I also very much appreciate the originality of the following approach. I need to add the theory of John Nash, developed in the early years of the Cold War, on the strategic nuclear balance between the USSR and the USA, the two great nuclear powers. It was verifiable in the paradigm of so-called Mutual Assured Destruction. Later, a new version of this conception was created. However, it was not successfully adapted to contemporary international relations because of its powerful mathematical apparatus, which is unable to analyse and assess the social processes quite accurately.

The material and sources used by V. Slavenski to develop his dissertation are reliable.

7. Contributions and significance of the doctorate for science and practice

The most important contribution of this dissertation is closely connected to the theory of John Nash and the Harvard Negotiation Project used to assess the strategic imbalance between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the context of the 2017 Agreement on Neighbourhood. No doubt that is an original contribution. *Secondly*, the dissertation scientifically proves that, in its relationship with North Macedonia, Bulgaria is acting in line with the EU's key and profound principles. *Thirdly*, the dissertation clearly demonstrates that since 2018, the Republic of NM has tended towards authoritarian political rule. This tendency manifests in North Macedonia's foreign policy and nationalism. *Fourthly*, the comparative analysis of the agreements between North Macedonia and Greece, as well as between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, also contributes to a clear understanding of the situation in the Balkans.

Finally, Slavenski formulates three subtheses for the dissertation's central hypothesis (p. 11, Diss.). There is a contradiction between the first and third subtheses. The first subthesis declares that “weaknesses of the Bulgarian Foreign policy are a result of a not well-developed foreign policy...”(p. 11, Diss.). The third subthesis states that “The Agreement is not so successful because of many reasons outside... like some changes in the EU as well as in the international situation since 2017” (p. 11 Diss.).

Assessing the doctorate presented by V. Slavenski, I do not bear in mind this contradiction in the central hypothesis.

8. Assessment of dissertation publications

B. Slavenski has presented four publications. Only one of them is in the field of the dissertation's topic.

9. Personal participation of the doctoral student

Doctoral student V. Slavenski has worked independently. The contributions formulated and the result obtained are his personal merit.

10. Authoreferat.

The Authoreferat accurately reflects the content of the dissertation text and meets the requirements of the relevant regulatory documents for the preparation of a doctorate.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations.

First, an author is obligated to cite not only the title and year of study he mentions, but also the accurate page of every quotation. This was mentioned in a preventive discussion on the dissertation. However, V. Slavenski did not accept it. Thus, in practice, there is no study correctly cited in Slavenski's dissertation.

Second. My second remark concerns the contemporary theory of conflict management. Defining conflict, Slavenski adopts the point of view of C. Ikle (1964), p. 134, Diss. In light of it, the conflict resolution is based on a profound transformation of the relations between the conflicting parties. That is true, but a significant part of the conflicts since the 19th century have been protracted. They are generated by an order of contradictions among national, religious, ethnic, cultural, and other identities, which agreements or contracts cannot eliminate. Thus, the structure of contradiction between the conflicting sides remains unchanged. The conflict is continuing. However, it can be managed. The successful management of it reduces its potential. This theory of contemporary conflicts has been elaborated by the Centre for International Development and Management of Conflicts (University of Maryland). A classic example of this type of conflict is the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The same kind of contradiction exists between Bulgaria and RNM. That is why it will continue for a long time, despite any Agreement.

Around 60% of the contemporary conflicts are protracted. In that context, the

international community changed the terminology slightly, and we are speaking of conflict using the concept of *conflict management*. It will be exciting to analyse the situation between R Bulgaria and RN Macedonia from the theoretical perspective outlined above.

12. Personal impressions.

I haven't had any impressions since 2018

13. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

The current political process is very complicated. A deeper understanding of protracted conflicts requires more historical distance and time to grasp these processes in their strategic, long-distance perspective. In that prospect, I recommend to V. Slavenski, after some time, returning to the topic of his dissertation to assess the situation since 2017, the ideas and theses again. The geopolitical formation of the Western Balkans since the end of the Cold War is not finished yet. These allow us to study and assess the processes that are occurring here again.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation contains scientific and theoretical results that represent an essential contribution to science and meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of this law, and the relevant Regulations of Plovdiv University P.Hilendarski.

The above gives me reason to propose to the respected members of the Scientific Jury to join this assessment and to unanimously award Vladimir Bonov Slavenski the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) in the field of Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.3. Political Sciences.

21st of December, 2025

Professor PhD, and DSc Rumen Kanchev

